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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PREF](#) [DJ](#) [SO](#) [UNHCR](#) [PREL](#) [SMIG](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: MISHANDLED SOMALI REFUGEE RETURN STRAINS
GODJ-UNHCR RELATIONS

REF: 11/10/09 SWAN-MCKELVEY EMAILS; 09 DJIBOUTI 593

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In mid-November, 43 Somalis rescued in international waters by a Dutch military ship and off-loaded in Djibouti were repatriated by the Government of Djibouti (GODJ) to Mogadishu (Ref A). UNHCR claimed that this constituted refoulement.

The GODJ maintained that UNHCR was aware of the planned return to Mogadishu, and in fact agreed to pay for it. Exchange of public recriminations followed. This botched return stands in contrast to the smooth screening and repatriation of 52 Somali migrants picked up by U.S. naval vessel "Lake Champlain" in May (Ref B) following detailed consultations among the U.S. Embassy, UNHCR, and the GODJ.

Unfortunately, the recent negative experience with the 43 migrants off-loaded by the Dutch may jeopardize future GODJ willingness to accept transit of Somalis picked up on the high-seas. End summary.

12. (U) On October 22, a Dutch ship rescued 43 Somalis in the Red Sea and received permission to disembark them in Djibouti on Nov. 4. According to UNHCR/Djibouti, ONARS (Djibouti's refugee coordination body) and UNHCR conducted interviews with the 43 individuals at the reception center at Loyada Nov. 7-8 and found that three were willing to return to Mogadishu. The remaining 40, according to UNHCR, wanted asylum in Djibouti. On November 10-44 all of the Somalis, including 6 women and 7 children, were repatriated to Mogadishu. UNHCR subsequently circulated a diplomatic note to all permanent missions to UNHCR in Geneva in protest of the perceived forced repatriation.

13. (SBU) On November 15, Djibouti's Deputy Secretary General for Refugee Affairs told ConOff and visiting Refugee Coordinator from Nairobi, that GODJ and UNHCR had both agreed to the repatriation and that UNHCR had agreed to fund the travel to Mogadishu. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs later issued a press release stating that UNHCR welcomed and housed those rescued at sea before organizing their return travel and that GODJ's only role was to see that everything ran smoothly.

14. (SBU) UNHCR/Djibouti Head of Delegation, Ann Encontre -- who was absent during the repatriation but left her capable deputy, Periklis Kotsaris, in charge -- confirmed there had been poor coordination between UNHCR/Djibouti, the GODJ, and the Dutch (who do not have an Embassy in Djibouti, and are represented by the French). She said much of the discussion over plans to off-load the migrants occurred directly between The Hague and UNHCR/Geneva, with inadequate attention to Djiboutian views. Djibouti is 60 percent ethnic Somali and already hosts a refugee camp of approximately 10,000 (mostly Somalis) as well as many unregistered Somali migrants living in urban areas. While a generous host to many refugees, Djibouti has a population of less than 1 million and is fearful of opening the floodgates to more refugees.

15. On Dec 23, UNHCR/Djibouti Rep. Encontre told ConOff that ONARS leadership claimed on Nov. 24 that during processing at the Loyada Refugee Reception Center, workers overheard the migrants say that three men travelling with them were armed with "Kalashnikovs" (Russian high-powered rifles) that they threw overboard when the

Dutch ship approached, indicating that the migrants may in fact have been trafficking victims. When local authorities demanded that the migrants identify their traffickers for prosecution or face deportation, none of the 43 migrants divulged the names. The order later came from the Djiboutian Presidency to send them all back, no exceptions. [Note: Encontre commented that she was skeptical of the claim by ONARS that the Somalis were returned because they refused to reveal the identity of "traffickers." ONARS made no such assertion at the time of repatriation. END NOTE]

16. (SBU) COMMENT: While this incident is now some two months old and has been reported by email, post is transmitting this front-channel message for the record. UNHCR and GODJ had hoped to replicate events from the smooth May repatriation of Somalis rescued by the US Navy, facilitated by a clearly defined agreement and careful planning among UNHCR, the GODJ and the USG. The miscommunication and poor coordination in the Dutch case led to the return of migrants to Mogadishu despite their assertion of claims to refugee status in Djibouti. Being painted as the sole culprit in this fiasco has justifiably upset the GODJ. In the future should any other migrants be rescued in international waters, the GODJ may not be as willing to grant them entry. END COMMENT
SWAN